

Playing Neutral: Indefensibility and the Quest for Filipino Independence

Prepared for delivery at the 2017 Neutrality Conference: "Lessons from the Past and Visions for the 21st Century,"
Instituto Complutense de Estudios Internacionales, Universidad Complutense,
October 27-28, 2017.

In 1898, the U.S. fought a short but transcendental war with Spain. As a consequence of that war, the U.S. acquired an "imperial archipelago" composed by Puerto Rico, Guam, Hawaii, and the Philippines.¹ Among them, the latter were, without any doubt, the most controversial of the new U.S. colonies. Too far from the U.S. homeland and too close to Asian conflicts and problems, with no direct historical links to the U.S., the Philippine islands were populated by a vast religious, ethnic, and culturally diverse population that seemed unassimilable to American society.

The U.S. acquisition of the Philippines provoked an intense debate over the meaning and implications of U.S. colonial rule in the archipelago. The American population's lack of knowledge regarding the Philippines created a need for information about their far-away colony, which was filled by a group of American scholars, writers, journalists, travelers, missionaries, and colonial and military officers. For more than thirty years they explained, classified, and described the Philippines and the Filipino people to the American public. In this process of knowledge production, they justify US colonialism questioning Filipino political capability, negating existence of a Filipino nation, misrepresenting Filipino history, and using alleged hostility between non-Christian and Christian Filipinos to question their readiness for independence.

¹ Lanny Thompson, *Imperial Archipelago: Representation and Rule in the Insular Territories under U. S. Dominion after 1898*, Hawaii: The University of Hawaii Press, 2010.

American imperialists also focused on security issues associated with the Philippines, arguing that the islands were a rich and strategic territory, surrounded by colonial powers eager for new colonies. Since Filipinos would not be able to protect their country, Filipino independence would inevitably pave the way for the conquest of the archipelago by a neighboring colonial power, ending the freedom and progress enjoyed by Filipinos under U.S. protection. They saw protection of the Philippines as an American responsibility that could only be fulfilled by American control of the archipelago.

Filipino nationalists understood that, in order to promote Filipino independence, they had to fight the representation of the Philippines as a vulnerable territory that could easily fall prey to imperial powers. However, their concerns were not only politically oriented. Filipino writers, scholars, politicians, and journalists developed a serious and genuine concern about Filipino security that drove them to look for answers to the Philippines' defense problems. Their concerns were based on two basic elements: the archipelago's geographic location and the international context. The Philippines were located in a strategic position between China and the Dutch East Indies, and very close to French Indochina. In other words, the islands were not only close to one of the largest world markets, but also to very important sources of raw materials. In addition, in the first decades of the 20th century, South East Asian international relations were characterized by imperialistic and militaristic competition among the colonial powers of the region, in particular the rise of Japan as a world power. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that Filipino survival as an independent country was a big issue of discussion for both Americans and Filipinos.

In their search for answers for the Philippines' "indefensibility," they found some solutions. They proposed the development of military readiness,

membership in the League of Nations, and the establishment of a U.S. protectorate as possible solutions. Some of them presented U.S. colonialism as the real menace for Filipino security and proposed independence as a self-defense move to avoid dangers associated with U.S. colonial rule. Some Filipinos argued that the Philippines could not be defended even by the U.S., and therefore, it was unfair to use indefensibility as an argument for rejecting Filipino independence. Finally yet importantly, they proposed the neutrality of the Philippines as an answer to the question about Filipino indefensibility.

Neutrality was one of the solutions most discussed among Filipinos. Some of them presented neutrality as the only way to guarantee Filipino security after independence. However, other Filipinos argued that neutrality was a discredited idea that did not prevent the German army from invading Belgium during World War I.

Neutrality was not only one of the main answers to the questions about Filipino indefensibility, but also one of the oldest. According to Filipino historian Lydia Yu-Jose, Filipinos used neutrality as an argument to justify independence since “the beginning of 1900.”² In 1933, seventy years before Yu-Jose’s statement, Pedro M. Blanco also identified neutrality as one of the main Filipino arguments for justifying independence. According to him, “no Filipino has ever advocated Philippine independence without incorporating the idea of neutrality, or some form of a protectorate, particularly the former. They see in neutrality a **"safety device"** that would permanently guarantee freedom of the Philippines.”³ Despite distance between their works, Yu-Jose and Blanco agreed that Filipino independence and neutrality were hand-to-hand. However, it is necessary to emphasize that the relation between neutrality and independence was not free from controversy. Neutrality of the Philippines was

² Yu-Jose. Op. cit p. 48.

³ Blanco, Op. Cit. p. 11.

a highly debated issue among Filipinos, American congressional representatives, and American imperialists.

Today I will focus on the Filipino debate about neutrality. Since there are many Filipino books, articles, speeches, and lectures dedicated to this topic,⁴ I would like to focus only on two subjects: Javier Gonzalez's 1915 article "La neutralización de las Filipinas" and Roberto Regala's 1935 book, *Neutrality of the Philippines*.⁵ I choose these two works because there are twenty years between them and, therefore, they respond to two different historical contexts. One was published during First World War and the other a year after U.S. Congress approval of the Tydings McDuffie Act, defining a period of transition for Filipino independence, and in the middle of the convulsive 1930s. Despite these differences, they both responded to the same concerns: how to protect the Philippines after independence.

Javier Gonzalez's assessment has a strong trade bias. His main argument is that neutrality was "the international status that would **better protect**" the Philippines.⁶ For him, independence would end with American control over the Philippines' trade, allowing the islands to trade with other countries. That openness would make Philippines neutrality attractive to other powers. For Gonzalez, neutrality was the preamble for a new kind of Open Door Policy for the Philippines that would guarantee access to the Filipino market for all world powers and, consequently, would secure integrity and security of the islands.⁷ Gonzalez reminds his readers that China's awakening was a matter of time. According to him, the Chinese people would eventually destroy foreigner's commercial bases in China and when that happened, a neutral Filipino republic would become Western powers' trade base in the Far East. In other words, he

⁴ See Yu-Jose, pp. 53, 56, and 64-65.

⁵ Javier Gonzalez, "La Neutralización de las Filipinas." *Cultura Filipina*, V, no. 8 (1915): 79-139 and Roberto Regala. *Neutrality of the Philippines. Two Lectures Delivered in the First University of the Philippines Alumni Institute*. Manila: Philippine of the Philippines Press, 1935.

⁶ Gonzalez, Op. Cit. p. 104. Emphasis is mine

⁷ Ibid. p. 104.

presents the Philippines as a commercial option to China, but that could only be possible with independence and neutrality of the archipelago.

Gonzalez also addresses a key question: Was neutrality a practical solution for Filipino security issues? To answer this question, he starts analyzing the international meaning of the neutrality of the Philippines. He focuses on three factors: first, in 1915, the year he published his book, all nations of the world were looking for American friendship; second, that the First World War would weaken European powers and their recovery would take time; and third, that American neutrality in the Great War had confirmed the U.S.'s pacific and friendly attitude. Thanks to these three elements, the Philippines' neutrality would be welcomed and supported by the world powers.⁸ In other words, Gonzalez argues that the international context was excellent for Filipino neutrality thanks to the U.S.'s international prestige and pacifist stance, and due to the war that was destroying Europe.

The war in Europe was very important for Gonzalez, because it would weaken the European powers, making them friendlier to the idea of a neutral Philippine Republic. The conflict would seriously undermine France, Germany, Great Britain, and Russia for at least fifty years and would make them welcome a neutral Philippines because they would not need to worry about the islands.⁹ For him, a neutralized Philippines would have a positive influence on international relations by keeping the balance of power in Asia.

What was necessary for a successful neutrality of the Philippines? According to Gonzalez, it was necessary that the Philippine Republic could be able to guarantee the security of foreign citizens and trade, especially, during wartime.¹⁰ For that, a centralized and powerful government was necessary "to put into effect internal laws and supported by a strong national defense that

⁸ Ibid. p. 107.

⁹ Ibid. p. 128-129.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 122-123.

could enforce a strict respect of Filipino neutrality.”¹¹ In addition to a neutrality agreement, it was also necessary to ensure a Filipino stable, strong, and centralized government able to maintain domestic stability. Gonzalez saw as indispensable the development of military readiness so that Filipinos could be capable to defend their country.

One of the main concerns about the neutrality of the Philippines was the question of its effectiveness. In other words, would other nations respect the Philippines’ neutrality? Was neutrality a practical solution for Filipino security issues? As a supporter of Philippine neutrality, Gonzalez could not avoid focusing on these questions, especially the Belgian precedent. The German invasion of Belgium during World War I was used to question the effectiveness of neutrality. Some writers and analysts argued that Germany’s violation of Belgium’s neutrality was proof of its ineffectiveness. Gonzalez rejects the use of German invasion of Belgium as argument against neutrality of the Philippines. According to him, the Philippines’ geographic location makes an invasion a very difficult task. In addition, a world power would not have to invade the Philippines in order to attack another power, like in the case of Belgium. Gonzalez argues that the Philippines’ strategic insignificance would guarantee its neutrality. The Philippines were not Belgium. They were not important or strategically located. Therefore, according to Gonzalez, it was, wrong and unfair to use what happened to Belgium in 1914 as an argument against Filipino independence.

In his efforts to minimize any comparison with the Belgium experience, Gonzalez also underlines Great Britain’s strong reaction to Germany’s violation of Belgium’s neutrality. According to him, when the Germans invaded Belgium, the British government did not evade its commitment to Belgian neutrality. According to Gonzalez, the real cause of the war between Germany

¹¹ Ibid. p. 123. Translation is mine.

and Great Britain was Belgium and not necessarily the Anglo-German military and economic competition. It is not clear why Gonzalez thought that Great Britain, or other power, would react to a violation of the Philippines' neutrality the same way that she reacted to the German invasion of Belgium, especially after he argued that the Philippines were strategically insignificant. It is not clear either, what did make Gonzalez see Great Britain -one of the main colonial empires- as a traditional protector of small nationalities.¹²

Filipino independence would be especially favorable for the U.S. because the islands had become a liability for the Americans. According to him, U.S. withdrawal from the Philippines would reduce American military budget and would allow the U.S. government to strengthen its national defense by relocating its Army and Navy in American national coasts. In addition, in case of war, the Philippines would be easily conquered by any enemy of the U.S. Despite the negligible strategic and economic significance of the Philippines to the U.S., the latter would not tolerate the conquest of the islands by anyone. In that case, the U.S. would have no other choice but to send its Navy and Army thousands of miles away from American coasts and spend millions of dollars to recover the Philippines and restore American honor.¹³ Gonzalez proposes Filipino neutrality, and therefore Filipino independence, as an economic and strategic advantage for the U.S. The Americans could not defend the islands and, therefore, they were a menace to American honor. Filipino neutrality was necessary not only for Filipino security, but also for American security.

Gonzalez insists that, by opening the islands' trade to all nations,¹⁴ Filipino independence and neutrality would help to reduce international

¹² However, he was not the only Filipino to look toward Great Britain as a source of security for the Philippines. Manuel Luis Quezon, one of the most important Filipino politicians during the American colonial period, also played with that idea. See: R. John Pritchard. "President Quezon and Incorporation of Philippines into the British Empire, 1935-1937." *Bulletin of the American Historical Collection* 12 (1984): pp. 43-63, Nicholas Tarling. "Quezón and the British Commonwealth." *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 13 (1977), pp. 52-67.

¹³ Ibid. p. 105.

¹⁴ Ibid.

tensions and frictions. Filipino neutrality would not only transform the islands into a rich country, but would promote world peace by improving communication between the world powers.¹⁵

Gonzalez also focuses on the possible impact of Filipino neutrality on Japanese-American relations. Although he argues that Japan was not interested in the Philippines, he also claims that neutrality of the islands would stabilize the Far East and avoid a war between Japan and the U.S. Gonzales acknowledges that American retention of the Philippines was a thorn in American-Japanese relations that could cause a war between the two nations. For that reason, Filipino independence and neutrality would improve American-Japanese relations and eliminate a source of political tension between Japan and the U.S. Filipino neutrality would also end Japanese international anxieties making unnecessary the so-called Asiatic Monroeism and its trading menace for western nations.¹⁶

Gonzales also addresses one basic question: which power could be a menace to the Philippines' neutrality? According to him, Great Britain would not be a menace for the Philippines because the war in Europe would change British attitudes towards colonialism and make them realize that colonialism was the cause of international conflicts.¹⁷ It is not clear what made him think that the war would change Britain's pro-colonial stance. Gonzalez also rejects any dangerousness to Filipino neutrality from France, Russia, and Italy because they were either not interested or too weak.

Curiously, Gonzalez pays a lot of attention to Spain. His approach is very friendly and reflects a strong pro-Spanish viewpoint. He argues that Spain would not be a menace for the Philippines because she has shown "her benign policy toward the Philippines."¹⁸ According to him, after the U.S., Spain was the

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 137.

¹⁶ Ibid. pp. 106-107.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 129.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 130.

only power that would defend and protect Filipino independence because of her historical and cultural links with the islands.¹⁹ Maybe this strong pro-Spanish stand could explain why this article was written in Spanish. Only a Hispanophile like him could argue that Spain would defend Filipino neutrality because of her maternal feelings toward the islands. In his presentation of Spain as Filipinos' "madre patria" ("Motherland"), Gonzalez forgot the history of Spanish colonialism in the Philippines. In addition, he imagined Spain as world power. It could be argued that in 1915 Spain was not in a position to give any support and help to the Philippines.

About Germany, Gonzalez contends that even if the Germans could win the war in Europe, they would not be a menace for the Philippines because of their domestic problems and their geographic limitations. Besides, a German violation of the Philippines' neutrality would provoke a reaction of the U.S., China, Japan, and all the other powers that would support the Philippines' neutrality. Even if Germany rose victorious from the European war, a neutral Philippines would be safe thanks to the global balance of power.

He also focuses on Japan, arguing that the Japanese Empire was not a menace to a neutralized Filipino republic. According to him, after the war in Europe, Japan would focus on the development of her colonies in Asia instead of looking for more colonies and more problems to deal with.²⁰ He also argues that Filipino tropical weather was an obstacle for any Japanese interest in the Philippines. According to him, "weather differences between Japan and the Philippines was a decisive factor over this issue [Japan menace to the Philippines] because the Japanese, as well as the American and the European, could not endure tropical weathers."²¹ For Gonzalez, a Japanese invasion of the Philippines would break the balance of power in Asia, causing serious problems

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. p. 133. Translation is mine.

to Japan because other powers would not tolerate a Japanese conquest of the Philippines.²² A Japanese invasion of the Philippines would also damage Japanese relations with Great Britain, her main ally, and, therefore, weaken her position in Manchuria.²³ In conclusion, a Japanese invasion of a neutral Philippines was, according to this author, against Japanese national interests.

Gonzalez emphasizes the balance of power as the foundation of Filipino neutrality. For him, the Philippines' neutrality would be safe because any move against the islands would break the balance of power in Asia, causing a strong reaction from the world powers. However, he acknowledges that there was a chance that no country would help the Filipinos in case of an invasion. If any of the signatory powers of a Philippines neutrality treaty did not react to a Japanese invasion, then Japan, or any other aggressor, would have to deal with Filipino national resistance.²⁴ In another sample of his love for Spain, Gonzalez reminds his readers how the Filipinos resisted Spain's "relatively benign sovereignty" and American liberalism as a proof of the task that any invading force would face in the Philippines.²⁵ The conquest of the Philippines would be so costly that no power would want to pay for it. Gonzalez concludes that Filipino nationalism was the best resource for Filipino security.

Twenty years after Gonzalez' article, Filipino writer, lawyer, and diplomat Roberto Regala published a book entitled *Neutrality of the Philippines*. In his book, Regala collects a series of lectures he gave at the "University of the Philippines Alumni Institute" on April 8 and 9, 1935. For Regala, finding a solution to Filipino security issues was a priority because he writes just a year after the U.S. Congress took action on Filipino independence. In March 1934, the U.S. Congress passed, and Filipino Senate ratified, the Tydings-McDuffie Act granting independence to the Philippines after a transition period of ten

²² Ibid. p. 134. Translation is mine.

²³ Ibid. p. 135.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid. Translation is mine.

years. For Regala, independence was not anymore a possibility but a coming reality.²⁶

Roberto Regala was a Filipino writer, lawyer, and diplomat. He was the Philippines' consul in San Francisco, ambassador to Australia (1950-1956), and minister in Israel and Austria. In 1958, he was appointed Justice of the Philippines Supreme Court.²⁷ In his 1930s lectures, Regala analyzes Filipino neutrality from an international point of view. He argues that, in view of international circumstances, neutrality was the best option for the Philippines' security after independence. According to him,

Under the present trend of world events, **neutrality of the Philippines will be the best guarantee for its security.** [...] It cannot be denied that the Philippines are not in a position to organize and maintain a standing army and navy, powerful enough to resist foreign aggression. **The tragedy of our present position is that the moment the United States withdraw from the Islands, the security of the newborn Philippine Republic would be uncertain.**²⁸

Regala argues that Filipinos would not be able to sustain independence after U.S. withdrawal from the archipelago. Therefore, Filipino independence, under the international tensions prevailing in the Far East, would open the door to a period of Filipino insecurity and uncertainty. Regala does not reject independence and the risks associated with her, but proposed neutrality as a security device for the Republic of the Philippines.

How did Regala characterize the international context? He starts stressing that Filipinos should pay close attention to what is happening in Asia

²⁶ Golay, Op. cit., p. 326-327.

²⁷ See: www-rcf.usc.edu/~camiling/phs.htm, www.geocities.com/Atehns/Academy/4059/famous2.html, and www.philembassy.au.com/amb-misc.htm.

²⁸ Regala, *Neutrality of the Philippines*, p. 17 Emphasis is mine.

because “the Pacific is fast becoming the center of world affairs.”²⁹ Events like Japan’s protectorate over Manchukuo, the denunciation by Japan of the Washington and London Treaties,³⁰ and Japanese fortification of the mandated islands of the Pacific were very important for the future of the Philippines. According to Regala, never was the balance of power in Asia more necessary for the Philippines than when he wrote his book. The end of that balance would mean a war between the colonial powers that would affect the archipelago. Regala is very straightforward: Japan’s aggressive foreign policy was not only a menace for Asia’s balance of power, but especially for the Philippines, because Japanese control of the Philippines “would make almost impregnable Japanese position in the Far East.”³¹

Although Regala identifies Japan not only as a menace to the Philippines, but also as the big troublemaker of Asia, he is not anti-Japanese. On the contrary, to some extent, he justifies Japan’s aggressive foreign policies focusing on her economic problems. According to him, Japan’s foreign policy was determined by her economic needs and problems. Japan could not sell her commercial and industrial surpluses because of “heavy tariff walls, and other restrictions manifested in all the other parts of the world, which indirectly affects its foreign trade, it would not be strange if it should be forced to conquer other colonies or territories.”³² For him, Japanese policy was a reaction against anti-Japanese trade policies of other countries. By closing their markets to Japanese markets, world powers forced the Japan to look for new markets by conquest.

Regala’s conclusion is that neutrality was necessary because Filipinos could not defend their country, the Americans would not be in the Philippines forever, the Japanese were a serious menace to the archipelago, and the

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See note 11

³¹ Ibid. p. 15.

³² Ibid. p. 16.

islands were exposed and endangered by their location and the innovations in naval and aerial warfare.

Although Regala argues in favor of the neutrality of the Philippines as the best way to protect the islands, he also makes clear that the Filipino people should not rely only in neutrality as sole guarantee for their security. According to him, “We [the Filipinos] cannot rely on the neutrality treaty for our security. The establishment of an adequate national defense might discourage foreign aggression.”³³ In other words, Regala proposed a combination of a neutrality treaty with a military preparedness program.

Regala also focuses on one of the big issues about neutrality: its effectiveness. He recognizes that World War I had a negative impact over neutrality as a mechanism for peace and stability. Germany’s violation of Belgium’s and Luxemburg’s neutrality “upset and placed in quandary the minds of many people, including the fervent advocates of neutrality, as of its effectiveness or practical utility” making necessary a “re-appraisal of neutrality as a practical guarantee or security for the political independence and territorial integrity of small states.”³⁴ However, he reaffirms his believe that the Philippines’ neutrality was not only possible, but also necessary. Despite doubts about neutrality’s effectiveness, Filipinos had no better option that combining neutrality with military readiness and taking the risks of freedom.

Despite the twenty-year distance between Regala and Gonzalez, both proposed neutrality of the Philippines as the best solution to Filipino security problems. For them, international context and issues left the Filipinos with no other solution than neutrality. Both defend neutrality effectiveness and viability. However, in some way, both also conclude that the Filipinos’ will and preparedness to defend their country was the ultimate and more reliable protection for the Philippines.

³³ Ibid. p. 17.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 9.